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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: AFGHAN PARLIAMENT - ONE WEEK UNTIL INAUGURATION DAY

11. (U) SUMMARY: In the final week before Afghanistan's first Parliamentary Inauguration in 30 years, discussions among MPs are intently focused on who will take the "plum jobs" in the new National Assembly. Despite skepticism among some partisan politicians in Kabul, both the Ambassador and USG PolOffs continue to expound the policy message that the USG is neutral in the race for Speaker and will neither support nor block any candidate. The Embassy has been deeply engaged in meeting with MPs of all stripes, and is monitoring the USG-sponsored orientation training session for MPs that began December 10. END SUMMARY.

THE GATHERING OF EGOS; THE BUZZ OVER SPEAKER  
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12. (U) Political energy in Kabul is rising to frenetic heights as newly-elected members of Afghanistan's first Parliament in 30 years meet to discuss the future of the Afghan National Assembly in the final week before Inauguration Day on December 19. While many MPs are meeting each other in Kabul for the first time, others have been busy for weeks campaigning for the highly coveted seat of President (Speaker) of the Wolesi Jirga (WJ, Lower House of Parliament). At local gatherings of politicians, talk is of little else.

13. (SBU) The WJ Speaker race at this point still appears wide open. Among the front runners are former President Rabbani, who may have the backing of President Karzai, and ex-Minister of both Interior and Education, Younus Qanooni, who lost to Karzai in last year's Presidential election. Meanwhile, the current speculation is that Professor Sigbatullah Mojadeddi will end up as the Speaker of the Meshrano Jirga (MJ, Upper House of Parliament) given that Pir Syed Gailani appears to have stood aside to allow his son Hamid Gailani to be named to the Upper House. (NOTE: Hamid failed in his bid to be elected to the Lower House in Paktika Province. END NOTE.)

USG REMAINS NEUTRAL, DESPITE UNIVERSAL DISBELIEF  
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14. (SBU) Despite the continuing insistence of numerous MPs that "other governments are backing their favorite Speaker candidates, so the US should too," the Ambassador and PolOffs continue to press the message that the US remains neutral in the race for Speaker. Still, our insistence that this is a matter for the 249 elected representatives of the Afghan people is a message that no one here quite seems to believe. Some, like Rabbani and Qanooni, have said verbally that they understand the US policy, while others simply refuse to accept it. In Afghanistan, conspiracy and ulterior motives are a way of life.

POLOFFS MAKE THE ROUNDS  
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15. (U) Embassy PolOffs have met with large numbers of MPs of all stripes in recent weeks, from former communist officials to mujaheddin fighters to foreign-trained technocrats. Some MPs are old friends who have been involved in Afghan politics for years. Others are new politicians who have only entered the political landscape since the fall of the Taliban government in 2001. The Afghan political game, however, remains constant, as power is bargained and brokered over lavish meals in private homes and at small gatherings in fancy restaurants.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: The week of orientation for MPs, which has been well attended by over 300 MPs, including such heavyweights as Mohaqqueq and Professor Sayyaf, is a perfect venue for continuing discussions about how Parliament will work and who will be Speakers. This is a game that Afghans excel at, and the final outcome is still unknown. END COMMENT.